

## [Dr. Castro's Princeton Visit, April 20-21, 1959](#)

Some two months after the barbudos of the Sierra Maestra made their triumphant entry into Havana, on March 10, 1959, Princeton University extended a formal invitation to Fidel Castro Ruíz, the 32-year-old Premier of Cuba and leader of the Revolution, to address a Senior Conference of the American Civilization Program, led by Robert Palmer, the Dodge Professor of History. Dr. Castro, as he was politely referred to in University correspondence, was asked to speak on the theme of "The United States and the Revolutionary Spirit," on April 20, 1959.

Fidel Castro's famous good-will tour of the United States in April 1959 was initiated in early January by the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The Society had invited the rebel leader, now Prime Minister of Cuba, to speak at its annual conference in Washington, D.C. Offers from other organizations and individuals followed, and Castro was soon booked by the National Press Club, the United Nations Correspondents Association, the Overseas Press Club and the National Broadcasting Company, which arranged a lengthy interview on the popular new television program "Meet the Press." Although snubbed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who made the strategic decision to leave town for a golf tournament in South Carolina rather than meet with the Cuban leader, Castro was belatedly invited to meet with dozens of government functionaries and public officials during his stay.

As the trip took shape the revolutionary government contracted with a public relations firm in New York to handle what eventually became an extended, 15-day U.S. tour, ending with a brief visit to Canada. An entourage of seventy was assembled for the trip, including three cabinet ministers, political consultants and aides, business representatives, security agents, and more than 30 members of the Cuban press. The party would bring 100 cases of Cuban rum and numerous boxes of cigars to distribute as gifts.

The public relations firm suggested that Castro and his nineteen bodyguards shave their now-famous beards and cut their hair before their arrival in Washington, but the suggestion was rejected out of hand. Before the visit was over Fidel would testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, meet with Vice-President Richard Nixon, Acting Secretary of State Christian Herter and dozens of other key officials during his visit. But the trip was unofficial in nature, and the new Prime Minister clearly saw symbolic value in his iconoclastic image.

The beards, ever-present cigars and olive fatigues worn by Fidel, Che, and the other heroes of the Revolution had played well in Cuba, and no doubt contributed to the Revolution's mystique in North America. Premier Castro's mastery of revolutionary symbolism in the media was unsurpassed. In 1959 Cuba had the highest per-capita ratio of television sets to population in Latin America, and the Premier's almost nightly appearances on the Cuban version of "Meet the Press" in January, February and March had honed his already considerable media skills. As a masterful spin doctor, he had learned to transform question-and-answer sessions into speeches, speeches into spectacles, and spectacles into platforms of popular political mobilization. His unprecedented access to the media during the April good-will tour would allow him to appeal directly to international public opinion - an opportunity that offered victory in the face of potential rejection. As is now evident, Castro's primary goal was to establish popular solidarity and sympathy for the Revolution in the United States, not to discuss trade agreements with its officials.

These motivations are confirmed by the leader's reluctance to address economic relations in any substantive fashion during the trip. Many Cubans (as well as North Americans) expected the new Premier to make the most of the trip by requesting economic assistance from Washington. The basic elements for such an approach were at hand: his entourage included leaders of the Cuban sugar industry, as well as cabinet ministers in charge of economic affairs. Four years earlier Castro had spent seven weeks in the United States to canvass funds for the 26th of July movement. The successful 1955

visit took him to Miami, New York, and even Union City, New Jersey, where he developed a network of supporters that might have been useful in pressuring the Eisenhower administration to respond to requests for assistance. But Dr. Castro would not, as a matter of revolutionary principle, request aid directly from Yankee imperialists. In a speech that immediately followed the North American tour he would demand that the United States inaugurate a 10-year \$30 billion program of economic assistance for Latin America as a whole - but he would do so in Buenos Aires, not Washington, at a meeting of the Organization of American States.

### Princeton Preparations

Castro's Princeton appearance was not without danger. Despite the university's reputation for idealism in international affairs (a legacy of the Wilson years), Princeton was hardly a hotbed of revolutionary fervor in 1959. A warm reception was not guaranteed. Both the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency were then headed by Princeton alumni known for their roles in the Cold War (brothers John Foster Dulles and Allen Dulles, respectively). John Foster Dulles resigned (for health reasons) as Secretary of State on April 15 - the day Castro arrived in Washington, but his ties to Princeton were well-established. Castro's anti-imperialist rhetoric was sure to ruffle some feathers. Still, Fidel, the former student activist, probably relished the opportunity to appeal directly to a group of student idealists - especially on the topic he was asked to address.

University archives preserve evidence that event organizers recognized that Dr. Castro's visit might present problems. As March turned to April the Premier, and several of his key political allies, became more outspoken and militant. Batistiano exiles charged that communists controlled key government posts, a theme that was echoed by others in Washington.

An internal memo to the Public Information Office dated Sunday morning, April 12, instructed that "the 'front office' (i.e. Nassau Hall) wants to play the whole affair sotto voce, confirming queries but not issuing any kind of official announcement of the visit." Such "quiet" visits were not unusual: the former Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, was scheduled for a similarly "closed" meeting the same week.

Although the anti-Batista purges, and especially the highly publicized "stadium trials," began to elicit stinging criticisms in the U.S. press in late March, U.S. press coverage of the Cuban Revolution was still sympathetic in tone (particularly Herbert Matthew's coverage in the New York Times), but reports of governmental confusion and "chaos" led to growing concern.

The upcoming Princeton visit rapidly assumed an importance that had probably not been anticipated early in March when the initial invitation had been extended. Given the anticipated media frenzy over the visit, event organizers began to prepare for what might develop into an uncontrollable (or uneasy) event.

On April 10, Professor Palmer, who would preside over the event, wrote the editor of the student newspaper, the Daily Princetonian, that "...it is the desire of all concerned, from President Goheen on down, to avoid excitement or disruption of campus life..." Administrators and faculty alike worried—with good reason—that the event could get out of hand if word of Dr. Castro's appearance was spread too widely. The Premier's explosive oratory, as described in news reports and television coverage of mass rallies in Havana, may have reminded an older generation of mass political actions in inter-war Europe. Princeton was definitely not the place for such activities. The event was played down as a purely "academic exercise," thus distancing the university community from anything that Dr. Castro might do or say while visiting the campus.

In his letter to the Daily Princetonian Professor Palmer indicated that he "would appreciate it," if the editor "felt it necessary to print any news of the event ahead of time," that the news be "toned down" and "not featured much." The editor might "briefly explain that the meeting is simply a conference for students in the American Civilization Program," but Palmer stipulated that the seminar meeting was "off the record," further clarifying that "no one is to be quoted or have anything attributed to him by name." "It should be all right," Palmer conceded, "to say that the event took place, who and how many were

present, and the general range of subjects touched on in the discussion." The character and tone of these advisories suggests that Palmer sensed that Dr. Castro's appearance might have troubling ideological overtones.

Despite attempts to play down Dr. Castro's visit, it became clear as April 20th approached that word of the event had been spread widely by outside sources. A press release would have to be issued, and guidelines established by the University, if only to contain the potential for chaos. In consultation with Professor Palmer, access to the event was restricted to ticketed guests, a policy that would effectively prevent the press from turning the event into a media circus. Two hundred tickets were distributed, including sixty-five for faculty guests and students enrolled in the American Civilization Seminar, fifty for the Cuban entourage, sixty-three for students enrolled in Latin American-related courses in History, Romance Languages and the Wilson School, and the remainder to small groups of guests on campus.

Administration officials clearly expected trouble—from the press, students, and from outside agitators. The exclusion of the press would product "some yaps," one official noted, but the Public Information Office justified this stance in light of the numerous opportunities Dr. Castro would have elsewhere to interact with the media. New Jersey Governor Robert Meyner arranged a press conference following the campus event at "Morven," the Governor's mansion in Princeton township, where a reception also was scheduled for the Cuban dignitaries. A phone call to the University from a State Department security agent on April 17 informed organizers of the campus event that the Cubans were planning to ask the students to leave the conference room at the end of Dr. Castro's speech, open the floor to the press and stage a "full-scale press conference, open to one and all." According to the security agent, who had heard the rumor from an informed source, the Cubans were "going to play this by ear," an unnerving change of plan (and policy) with unforeseen implications.

Student reaction to the visit was another unknown variable, although there were strong indications that the student body looked forward with great anticipation to the event. The April 12 Public Information Office memo concludes with a telling wish made only half in jest: "My prayers for April 20th are for the kind of downpour we haven't seen since Father Noah climbed into the Ark. It is my fear that our bully boys, given a balmy April evening and a supply of cherry bombs, will be 'up' for Castro."

### Early Readings of the Revolution

In light of the evidence of official trepidation surrounding the visit, how and why had Princeton tendered the invitation to Dr. Castro in the first place? In retrospect the invitation might have been justified as an exercise in academic freedom (the clear intent of the use of the phrase "academic exercise" to describe Castro's involvement in the seminar). But other factors were undoubtedly at play, and the answer would appear to lie more in Princeton's institutional dynamics than it does in any particular ideological affinity with or attraction to the revolutionary leader.

Two factors bear consideration in this regard. First is the matter of the timing of the initial invitation. In the early months of 1959, the trajectory of the Cuban Revolution was far from predictable. Even Premier Castro had a difficult time articulating a coherent political and economic strategy in the confusing, early weeks of the Revolution. And while undoubtedly powerful as Premier in March and April, Castro's ultimate success in consolidating political power came much later that spring. Concern over the purges, agrarian reform, and possible nationalization of certain industries had begun to fuel fears and rumors of a communist takeover. However in the spring of 1959 Dr. Castro vehemently denied that he was a communist, or even a socialist.

At the height of the Cold War, anticommunist paranoia was so pandemic that accusations of "communist leanings" and infiltrations had become standard readings of political change - in almost any direction - in Latin America. In the context of such hyperbole, reformist North American liberals sympathetic to political change in Latin America could legitimately embrace the Cuban Revolution - and many did - if only to argue that structural reforms coupled with economic development were needed to "save" the island from communism. Given the brutality of the Batista regime even pragmatists in the national security apparatus could appreciate the need for a profound social and political transformation in Cuba.

In this light, Princeton's initial interest in inviting Castro to speak - in early March - might be read as a cautious embrace of principles of revolutionary legitimacy under oppressive conditions.

The second factor is more specific to Princeton at the time, and leads to an investigation of the conditions surrounding the actual invitation. Despite the presence of a distinguished faculty with interest in international politics, economics and history, the Princeton faculty at the time included few Latin American specialists, and none with detailed knowledge of the Cuban resistance movement. The few who were on campus were not involved in extending the actual invitation, although Professor Dana Munro, the one faculty "area expert" in residence, was invited to the event and probably consulted. Professor Palmer's expertise was theoretical and comparative. His seminar on modern revolutions in the American Civilization Program focused primarily on the European experience, not nationalist revolutions in the Third World. With such thin faculty expertise in the region, the University was open to suggestions from appropriately credentialed outsiders.

### Family Connections

Characteristically, it was a wealthy alumnus, Dr. Roland T. Ely, who provided the initial inspiration for the visit. The University press release cites Ely as being "largely responsible for planning Dr. Castro's visit." Thirty-three years old in 1959, Ely was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Princeton ('46) who had gone on to Harvard for graduate work. A former Marine, Ely spent five years in Cuba and Barbados after his military discharge conducting research for a dissertation on Cuban economic history (which focused on a direct ancestor involved in the Cuban sugar industry, Moses Taylor). In the course of his research in Cuba he had met Fidel Castro, and though not an intimate of the guerrilla leader he had come to sympathize with the Revolution.

Ely's permanent residence was in Princeton township on an estate named "Hormiguero," where he had previously hosted two Cuban exiles brought to power by the Revolution - his cousin, Enrique Menocal y Villalón, who had been appointed Director General of Revenue and Taxation by the regime, and Manuel Urrutia, now President of Cuba.

Ely had returned to Cuba in January, 1959, to coordinate the Spanish-language publication of his dissertation. While in Havana he extended a personal invitation to Premier Castro to visit Princeton in a meeting arranged by his cousin, probably in mid-February. While University archives preserve no record of conversations or correspondence between Ely and the Princeton faculty, it is clear that President Goheen's formal invitation was an extension of Ely's personal contact with Premier Castro.

As an alumnus with the proper social and academic credentials, Ely was in a good position to influence the Princeton academic community in the late 1950s. He had recently been hired to teach Latin American economic history at nearby Rutgers University (as well as the nearby Lawrenceville School), and was apparently on good terms with key faculty members - good enough, at least, to engineer one of the most controversial visits of foreign leaders to Princeton in modern history.

Interviewed shortly before the visit by Newark Evening News reporter John O. Davis, Jr., Ely indicated that he regarded himself as a "citizen ambassador," and defended the Cuban Revolution as a scholar who had spent years in Cuba. He was familiar with - indeed related to - several of the principal protagonists of the Revolution. Ely refuted accusations that the Revolution had a "communistic tinge," and suggested that such sentiments were "misleading and harmful to relations" with the United States. "Thankfully," he added, "a vast majority of the [Cuban] people and their leaders are strongly democratic." As previously arranged, Ely traveled to Washington to meet the Cuban party and escort the entourage to Princeton. He would also serve as Dr. Castro's official host.

### The Party Arrives

Dr. Castro's conciliatory public appearances in Washington between April 15 and April 20 appeared to confirm an intention to steer a moderate course for the Revolution. Castro dismissed suggestions that he was flirting with communism, and deflected criticism of his proposed agricultural reform by stressing that only "excessive" properties would be appropriated. His performance did not, however, instill

confidence in skeptics. The Premier's vague commitment to democratic principles, and especially his defense of revolutionary justice, left astute observers ill at ease. Still, Dr. Castro was largely successful in generating enthusiasm and popular sympathy for the Revolution by taking to the streets of Washington at all hours of the day and night.

Observers in Princeton following the events in Washington may have found Dr. Castro's tendency to waffle on key issues problematic, but more troubling was his tendency to depart from official protocols, agreements and schedules in an effort to "reach out" to the common man. Castro had received several death threats since his arrival in the United States, and security at Princeton was tightened accordingly. The State Police was brought in to assist; dorms were searched for bombs and cleared in the afternoon preceding the visit; sharpshooters were posted on buildings across from the site of the conference in Corwin Hall (then home to the Woodrow Wilson School). Dr. Castro became the most heavily guarded visitor to the University in modern history, and the elaborate security precautions served to heighten student anticipation of the visit.

In Washington on Sunday morning, April 19, Dr. Castro was driven to Mount Vernon, then to the Mall. After reading the text of the Gettysburg Address at the Lincoln Memorial, he conveyed to gawking onlookers his impression that the document "supported the ideals of the Cuban revolution." In modern parlance, he may have been testing reactions among an improvised "focus group" in preparation for his Princeton speech the next day. He was then driven to a television studio for his famous appearance on "Meet the Press," and in the late afternoon was shuttled to the Capitol Building for a meeting with Richard Nixon. The following day he gave a luncheon speech at the National Press Club, then, joined by his entourage, boarded a train at Union Station.

The party pulled into Princeton Junction at 6:45 p.m., and was met by thousands of supporters, mostly Princeton students, who jammed the platform and surrounding area. Several of the more acrobatic students had climbed into the trees on the sides of the tracks and waved Cuban flags. The Cubans were shuttled with a police escort to "Hormiguero," Ely's estate, to prepare for the evening conference. Dr. Castro stayed at "Hormiguero" that evening, along with Teresa Casuso, Ernestina Ortero, Celia Sánchez, Capitán Jesús Llanes, and nine bodyguards, or *barbudos*, as they were referred to in the official housing list. Small parties of other dignitaries were to spend the night in private homes; the three cabinet officers were hosted by Governor and Mrs. Meyner. The twenty-nine male members of the Cuban press spent the night as guests of the University Cottage Club on Prospect Avenue.

By 7:00 p.m. students and other onlookers had begun to assemble behind police lines on the far side of Washington Road, across from the Woodrow Wilson School. Ticketed guests entered the conference room and took their seats. Despite a light rain, an estimated two thousand flag-waving spectators crowded the cordoned-off area along the road by the time the Cuban entourage arrived, shortly before 8:00. Princeton's enthusiastic "bully boys" lived up to their reputation, lighting cherry bombs and chanting "¡Viva Castro!" As the Premier's limousine pulled up to Corwin Hall students broke through police lines and surrounded his car, shouting "Speech!" and "¡Viva!" When the police tried to re-establish a security perimeter around the car they were booed heartily by the excited crowd.

Newspaper accounts called it a "riotous welcome," emphasizing the mayhem that followed the breach of security. Separated from the entrance by the cheering mob, a squad comprised of state and local policemen, university proctors and Cuban *barbudos* formed what was described as a "flying wedge," which carried Dr. Castro to the entrance. A student contributor to the Princeton Alumni Weekly later described the scene as "Fidel Castro's circus," and the show had just begun.

### Dr. Castro's Appearance

Shortly before the Cuban entourage entered Corwin Hall, University officials were appraised of another change of plan - in the form of a demand by the Cuban journalists who accompanied the Premier that their Yankee press colleagues be admitted to the auditorium. They threatened to boycott the event if their demand was not met. Caught between potential accusations of censorship by the Cuban press, on the one hand, and chaos in the conference room, on the other, event organizers chose the latter. Castro

was reported to have intervened personally in the resolution of the dispute. American reporters jammed into the hall, and Professor Palmer's opening announcement that photographs would be prohibited was barely audible above the popping of flash bulbs.

In his introduction Professor Palmer again stressed that the event was an "academic exercise" and "off the record," and laid out ground rules for the discussion to follow the speech. Accounts of Castro's address that evening are sketchy, despite the presence of so many reporters. A March 1961 request to the Public Information Office for the text of the speech elicited a curt, two-sentence reply - Princeton had "no record of the remarks made by Fidel Castro at Princeton," followed by: "He attended a seminar and spoke informally for a few minutes." In fact, reports filed on April 21 indicate that Dr. Castro spoke for some two-and-a-half hours, and that when Professor Palmer attempted to cut off the Cuban leader, Castro "pushed" him back into his seat on the rostrum.

In a symposium commemorating the event twenty-five years later (1984), Professor Palmer remembered Dr. Castro's gesture as more of a "brush," but also recalled that the Premier was "a terrible talker."

Fidel's English skills were adequate, if rough, and other press accounts suggest that he took seriously Princeton's invitation to speak on the theme of the "revolutionary spirit." References to the United States were few, but his defense of the revolutionary imperative covered considerable territory. He first addressed existing theories of revolution, noting that the Cuban experience had shattered three myths. First, that "a revolution could be successful even if the mass of people are not starving." Second, that revolutionary forces "could defeat regular military forces;" and third, that a revolution "could succeed against modern arms." Guerrilla tactics aside, Castro attributed the success of the Cuban Revolution to the widespread "fear and hatred of Batista's secret police," and to the fact that the rebels "had not preached class war," thereby gaining "95 per cent support" from the population.

A student journalist noted that Dr. Castro promised that "he would lead the country to economic and cultural progress without sacrificing individual freedoms." Castro also was reported to have said that democracy was "the most beautiful political and social idea." The latter remark was greeted with a standing ovation. Long Island Newsday reported that the Premier had claimed in his address that he "expected and would allow minority parties to develop" in opposition to his regime, and that while there were "no plans to nationalize any lands," his government would "expropriate legally" any "idle or unproductive lands."

On the international front, Dr. Castro went to great lengths in the question-and-answer period to condemn the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. He claimed that Trujillo was organizing insurgent forces poised to topple the Cuban government, as well as other Latin American regimes. Castro pledged that his government would "give all aid short of war to forces seeking to liberate the Dominican Republic."

The Newark Evening News reported that Dr. Castro had said that Cuba "asked for nothing" from the United States, only "understanding." Charges of communism leveled against the regime, he claimed, were part of a campaign by opposition leaders outside of Cuba. "His government was pledged to 'satisfying the people's material needs without sacrificing any freedoms.'" "There is little room in Cuba for communist ideas," he declared.

Despite Professor Palmer's negative evaluation of the Premier's rhetorical skills, press accounts suggest that Dr. Castro charmed the audience by joking about his broken English. Other moments of levity are apparent. In response to an implied accusation that his motives were less than altruistic, Castro reportedly rejoined with the following assertion: "I could be rich ... You know how? By writing the history of our revolution for Hollywood."

Reaching Out

At the end of a very long evening in Corwin Hall, Premier Castro stepped down from the rostrum and headed for the front entrance, where hundreds unable to gain entry still milled about in the light rain. A

policeman directed him to the back door and ushered him to a waiting limousine, which headed down Washington Road towards Governor Meyner's residence. Dr. Castro demanded that the car be turned around and driven back through campus, led by squad cars with sirens on and emergency lights flashing. When the caravan again reached the area of Corwin Hall Castro ordered the driver to halt the car. To the amazement and delight of onlookers, Castro popped out of the vehicle and began another impromptu speech, which this time lasted only ten minutes. The Premier was finally whisked away to the press conference and reception at the Governor's mansion around 10:45 p.m, over an hour late.

At "Morven," Dr. Castro was greeted by the Governor and his wife, as well as several distinguished guests who had also been on the Princeton campus that day. The latter included Dean Acheson, the former Secretary of State.

Acheson had participated in an event sponsored by the Whig-Clio Philosophical Society. According to Acheson's biographer, Douglas Brinkley, Acheson claims to have spoken at length with the Cuban Premier, with only one Cuban interpreter present, and came away from the discussion "deeply impressed." Acheson is also reported to have described the conversation to a former State Department colleague, who in turn reported that Dr. Castro had been "blunt" with Acheson about "future difficulties" between Cuba and the United States. Acheson had said that Fidel suggested that the economic difficulties facing Cuba would force him to "blame the Yankee colossus . . . for most of his country's problems." This anecdote would appear to be apocryphal given Castro's cautious handling of Cuba-U.S. economic and foreign relations during his visit. The comment is out of character, and there is no evidence to support the claim that the encounter took place at a dinner at the Wilson School that evening, rather than a late-night reception at "Morven." The former Secretary of State also reportedly predicted that Castro would "cause us some problems down the road." He no doubt recalled the meeting two years later, when, as special advisor to President Kennedy during the Missile Crisis, he urged a pre-emptive bombing strike on Cuba in response to Castro's aggressive defense of the Revolution.

The reception at "Morven" broke up after midnight, and aside from complaints that the Cubans had littered the floor of the mansion with cigar butts, it was deemed a success. Castro was driven back to "Hormiguero," Roland Ely's estate, where the Premier and a smaller group of intimates continued the festivities into the early morning.

The next morning Premier Castro was taken to the Lawrenceville School, a private prep school near Princeton where Roland Ely also taught. After a brief address there he returned to the University for a scheduled meeting with President Goheen, and later re-joined his entourage at Princeton Junction where the group caught the New York train.

The student journalist who described Dr. Castro's visit in a May 1, 1959, article in the Princeton Alumni Weekly reported that "he [Castro] left, and Princeton went back to sleep." But the visit had left a mark on Princeton - memories that would grow in importance as Cuba-U.S. relations deteriorated in May and June of 1959. The visit also had an impact on Dr. Castro, who opined in his speech at the Lawrenceville School that Princeton was "a paradise for all who want to study."

### Author:

- [E. Bogenschield, Thomas](#)

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